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Intelligence Boss Is Needed



THE TROUBLE with the intelligence service of the United States is that it has no commander. This is the point perceived by President Nixon during a recent secret White House briefing at which the President literally threw up his hands in a display of impatience at the vast, expensive and complicated bureaucracy which had been described.

The President had asked for the briefing because of three recent and irritating intelligence failures.

The first was at Sontay, in North Vietnam, where the Army mounted a dangerous operation to recover prisoners who weren't there.

Second was the failure to learn that the North Vietnamese were using the Port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia as a vast supply center—a fact discovered only after we barged into Cambodia thinking the supply center was somewhere else.

Third was the failure of the U.S. command in South Vietnam to forecast the speed with which the North Vietnamese could send reinforcements into Laos, and the Army's failure to estimate how many South Vietnamese ground troops and American airmen would be needed to do the job.

ALL THESE failures caused the President to ask for a clear explanation of how our intelligence system

works—and why it sometimes doesn't work. What he received was an accurate account of confusion.

The first point Mr. Nixon learned is that the \$2 billion-a-year intelligence effort is not commanded but coordinated. Richard Helms, a careful objective analyst, commands CIA but not the Defense Department's intelligence arm, which is headed by Lt. Gen. Donald V. Bennett. General Bennett, in turn, doesn't really command his own forces because he is often dealing with intelligence requests from officers who outrank him and whose wishes must be regarded as orders.

Thus compromise frequently substitutes for decision in determining Defense Department intelligence priorities. Bennett must try to satisfy an admiral who insists that developments in submarine detection must come first, a general who is more interested in the thickness of Soviet armor, and an Air Force man who insists on priority for new developments in the Soviet SAM. Helms must balance all this with the importance of finding out what the Russians are putting in their ICBM bases and why.

Nobody is boss. Nominally, Helms is "coordinator" of the intelligence effort, but since most of the

money for intelligence comes through the Department of Defense, there is a natural inclination to tell the coordinator how the money should be spent.

PRESIDENT NIXON would like to bring Helms into the White House. That is usually the first thought of the boss who wants a clear picture of what he may have to deal with, and one man to whom he can turn to get it. But if Helms makes this move, he will have to give up running the Central Intelligence Agency, where he first made his mark as a master of spy networks and into which he has brought both order and a healthy sense of restraint. (It was not Helms' wish to involve the CIA in Laos.)

With Helms in the White House, the intelligence effort would soon be domi-

nated by the Defense Department. On the basis of recent performance, that would be a disaster. Former CIA Director John McCone, who was also asked to move to the White House, argued that he would become merely a go-between with the agency he commanded, which had withered into an anachronism, much as the State Department has withered with the advent of resident foreign affairs aides.

One compromise open to the President is to give Gen. Bennett another star, thus putting him on equal footing with the others who are asking him to make their priorities his own. If this President—or another—really wants a better intelligence system, he will eventually have to put somebody in charge.

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